MIT's Oldest and Largest Newspaper

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The Tech
Established 1881

Volume 139, Number 30

Thursday, December 5, 2019

WEATHER, p. 2

THU: 40°F | 26°F
Mostly clear.

FRI: 38°F | 24°F
Snow and rain.

SAT: 31°F | 22°F
Clear.

ETHAN SIT —THE TECH

Students enjoy free food, mugs, and group performances at Tech Twinkles, hosted by the Undergraduate Association Tuesday in La Sala.

UA, GSC finalize members for two new student committees

The UA and GSC valued a diversity of perspectives in the committees, in addition to results of student vote

By Wenbo Wu and Shelley Choi

The Undergraduate Association and Graduate Student Council selected student members for two newly-created committees, the Student Committee on Guidelines for Outside Engagements and the Student Committee on Campus Climate and Policies around Discrimination and Misconduct Nov. 12. Five undergraduate and five graduate student members were selected for each committee from a final pool of ten undergraduates and ten graduates.

Mahi Elango '20, UA president, and Peter Su G, GSC president, will co-chair the Student Committee on Guidelines for Outside Engagements. Fiona Chen '21 and Bianca Lepe G will co-chair the Student Committee on Campus Climate and Policies around Discrimination and Misconduct.

Based on an email to the undergraduate student body Oct. 29 from Elango, to select the undergraduate committee members, the UA had an open call for nominations. Then, the UA interviewed each nominee and narrowed the list down to ten final candidates for each committee. The undergraduate student body voted on these candidates prior to the UA finally choosing committee members to ensure that each committee had diverse perspectives.

According to an email to the graduate student body Nov. 5, Su outlined that for the graduate committee members' selection, each student was allowed to vote for up to ten candidates for each committee. Based on this vote, the final pool was narrowed to ten graduate students for each committee with two students representing each of the five graduate schools.

The final committee members were determined by scoring each candidate using a weighted sum of the "yea" vote percentage of the GSC Nominations Board and the "yea" vote percentage of voting students. Student votes received a weight of 16.2, three times the student voter turnout of 5.4 percent. GSC Nominations Board votes received a weight of 83.8, one minus three times the student voter turnout percentage.

Su said in an interview with *The Tech* Dec. 3 that the UA and GSC chose not to base committee membership directly on student body vote as low voter turnout and a higher proportion of votes from inherently larger communities may result in a committee that fails to accurately capture the student body's diverse perspectives.

Because each graduate school provides "a different perspective and is connected to a different community," Su said that the "primary diversity point we ended up looking at was School." There was one student who ranked in the top five for both committees but was selected for neither.

The votes for undergraduate candidates "were very close as well, and we did almost match exactly the committee membership to the results of the election," Chen said in an interview with *The Tech* Dec. 4.

One undergraduate was elected to both committees but was assigned to serve on the Committee on Campus Climate and Policies due to projected time commitments. The person with the seventh-highest number of votes, rather than the sixth-highest, took their place on the Committee on Guidelines for Outside Engagements.

Committee, Page 2

Six voted AAAS honorary fellows

Professors Baggeroer, Flynn, Harris, Klopfer, Lauffenburger, and Leonard are among 443 fellows elected October 2019

By Jocasta Manasseh-Lewis
STAFF REPORTER

Six MIT faculty members were elected fellows of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) October 2019, according to an MIT News release.

The faculty members elected were Arthur B. Baggeroer ScD '68, professor of mechanical, ocean and electrical engineering; Suzanne Flynn, professor of foreign languages and linguistics; Wesley Harris, professor of aeronautics and astronautics; Eric Klopfer, head of the comparative media studies and writing section; Douglas Lauffenburger, professor of biological engineering, chemical engineering, and biology; and John Leonard, professor of mechanical and ocean engineering.

According to the AAAS website, fellows are "member[s] whose efforts on behalf of the advancement of science or its applications are scientifically or socially distinguished and who has been a continuous member for the four year period leading up to the year of nomination."

Arthur Baggeroer, an emeritus Ford professor of engineering who is also a secretary of the navy and chief of naval operations chair for

AAAS, Page 2

IN SHORT

Winterfest is being held Dec. 9 at Charles M. Vest Student Street and the Koch Institute Lobby from 3:30–5:00 p.m.

The **last day of classes** for the Fall term is Dec. 11.

Pre-registration for IAP and Spring classes is open.

End-of-term subject evaluations are open until 9 a.m. Dec. 16.

Final exams begin Dec. 16.

Interested in joining *The Tech*? Stop by for dinner Sunday at 6 p.m. or email *join@tech.mit.edu*.

Send news and tips to *news@tech.mit.edu*.

ARUN WONGPROMMOON—THE TECH

Students make an army of snowmen on Killian Court as MIT weathers its first snowstorm of the season Tuesday.

Hayden library closes for renovations beginning Dec. 19

Hayden Library's study spaces will not be accessible from Dec. 19 through September 2020, when the library reopens. The last day to browse or request Hayden's general book collections will be Dec. 15.

Although Hayden's general book collections will be i naccessible during the renovation process, "more than 90 percent of Hayden general collections are also available by request through Borrow Direct and Interlibrary Borrowing," according to the MIT Libraries website. Their website also contains a list of alternate available collections and services.

Plans for the new library space include a café overlooking the Lipchitz Courtyard, eight new group study rooms, and a flexible event and teaching space.

Director of Library Communications Brigham Fay and Deputy Director Tracy Gabridge '88 wrote in an email to *The Tech*, "Library space has to serve a lot of different functions and accommodate a variety of study styles, so it was a challenge to meet all those requirements in a renovation project that is tightly scoped and budgeted."

The renovated Hayden will accommodate all types of learners, both those who seek a quiet environment and those who seek a social environment, according to Fay and Gabridge.

Fay and Gabridge also wrote that the new renovations were designed to be an impactful destination for the MIT community. "It has been designed with accessibility and inclusivity in mind, and we hope it will attract community members who have never even used Hayden before."

"We thank the MIT community for their patience during the Hayden closure and are grateful to Campus Planning and Facilities, whose planning made it possible to be closed for just one semester. We think these improvements will be well worth it, and cannot wait to welcome everyone to the new Hayden," wrote Fay and Gabridge.

—Margaret Rodriguez

SETH LLOYD

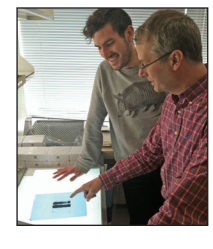
Student writes that Lloyd should be allowed to teach. **OPINION, p. 4**

TWO POPES

An intimate portrayal of a historical moment. **ARTS, p. 6**

SPARKLITE

Cute, fun, and addictive. **ARTS, p. 5**



VANDER HEIDEN LAB

Understanding cancer cell metabolism.
SCIENCE, p. 3

SAVING THE WORLD FROM BOREDOM

Dare to stay awake through *Little Joe*.
ARTS, p. 5

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WEATHER

Do you want to build a snowman?

By Sheila Baber
STAFF METEOROLOGIST

Winter isn't really winter in New England until snow sticks on the ground. Which, looking out the window, it has! Already the denizens of Dorm Row have filled Briggs field with much laughter and flying snowballs, and the sidewalks are tinted blue and purple with pavement salt. Be sure to watch your step, for ice lurks everywhere…

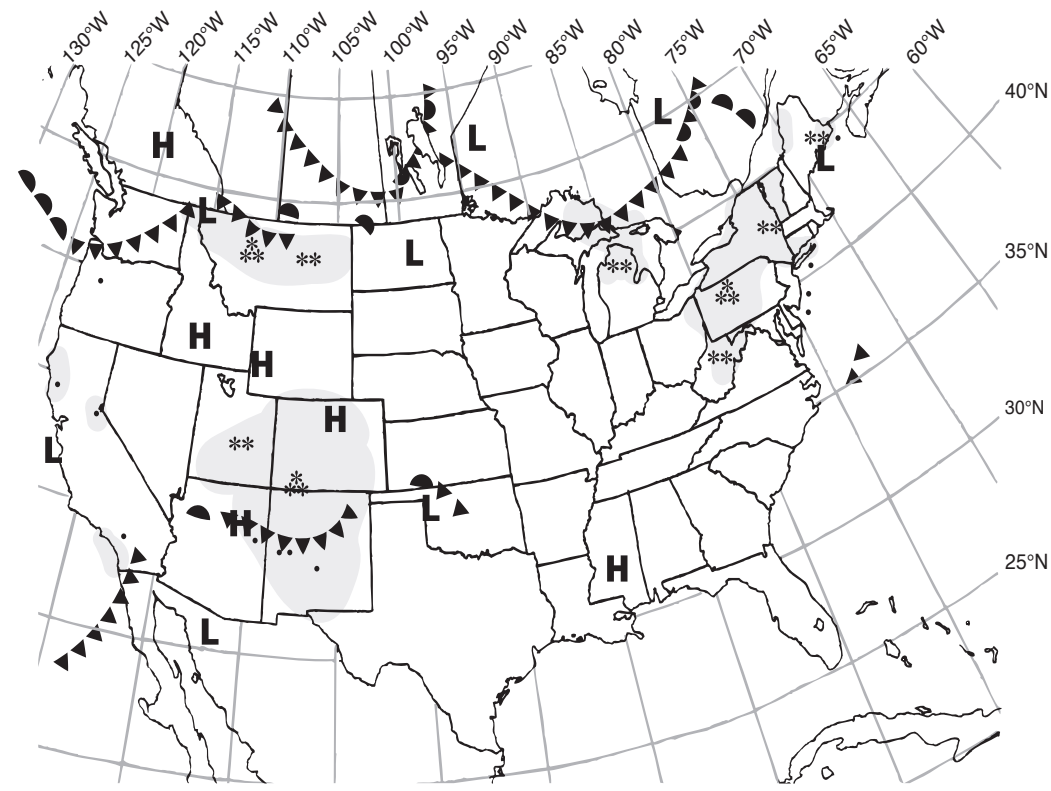
On Friday there is a chance of snow and rain, followed by a clear Saturday night with a high near 42 *F! Catch some of that warmth while you can, because from here on out it will only get colder. If you need financial support for winter clothing, S^3 can help you.

Looking a little farther away, it seems like many things will be falling from the sky. Chance of rain Sunday night, chance of rain Monday, chance of rain Tuesday—but given how unpredictable weather can be, who knows? Maybe more snow! Perhaps even a snow day before finals!

And if it does, do you want to build a snowman?

Extended Forecast

Today: Mostly clear with high around 40°F (4.4°C) West winds 8 — 13 mph.
Tonight: Mostly clear, low around 26°F (-3.3°C). West winds 11—15 mph.
Tomorrow: Slight chance of snow and rain showers in the afternoon. Partly sunny, with a high around 38°F (3.3°C) and low around 24°F (-4.4°C). West winds around 10 mph. Little (½ inch) to no accumulation of snow expected.
Saturday: Sunny, with a high near 31°F (-0.5°C) and low near 22°F (-5.5°C) . Northwest winds 10-13 mph will become west winds 7-9 mph in the evening.
Sunday: Mostly sunny with a high near 42°F (5.6°C) and low near 39°F (3.9°C). Southwest winds throughout the day. Change of precipitation is 30%.



Situation for Noon Eastern Time, Thursday, December 5, 2019

Weather Systems	Weather Fronts	Precipitation Symbols			Other Symbols
H High Pressure	Trough		Snow	Rain	Fog
L Low Pressure	Warm Front	Showers	* ▽	• ▽	Thunderstorm
§ Hurricane	Cold Front	Light	*	•	Haze
	Stationary Front	Moderate	**	••	Compiled by MIT Meteorology Staff and *The Tech*
		Heavy	⁂	⁖	

Committee to host student conversations on outside engagements

Committee, from Page 1

In an email to *The Tech*, Chen wrote that the student was chosen "because the sixth and seventh candidates had received nearly identical vote counts (one vote apart), and we felt that the candidate who had been ranked seventh would add a more unique perspective to the committee."

For the Committee on Campus Climate and Policies, Chen wrote, "We switched out a student who had a very similar background to another member of the committee in terms of campus involvement in living group."

The Student Committee on Guidelines for Outside Engagements will host student-only conversations Dec. 8 from 2–3:30 p.m. in 26-152 and Dec. 10 from 7–8:30 p.m. in 32-082 "to discuss how MIT should act in a series of hypothetical situations involving outside engagements, such as grants, gifts, and any other associations and collaborations," Elango wrote.

"Dissent is really important," Elango said in an interview with *The Tech*. "We recognize that perhaps there might be certain opinions that aren't in the majority, but are still important for us to consider when we're thinking about these engagements."

In emails to *The Tech*, members of the Student Committee on Guidelines for Outside Engagements Bryan Padilla '22, Max Langenkamp '21, Amauche Emenari G, and Aiyah Josiah-Faeduwor G commented on their reasons for joining. Many centered around MIT's lack of transparency.

Padilla commented on MIT's mission statement to "advance knowledge and educate students in science, technology, and other areas of scholarship that will best serve the nation and the world in the 21st century." Padilla wrote, "Simply put, I don't think MIT is actually embodying its mission statement."

Langenkamp wrote that he plans to "use this position to advocate for a more democratic and inclusive dialogue around funding" and how it may influence research at MIT.

Emenari wrote that he joined to share the views of fellow students in the Media Lab that stemmed from anger and confusion following the Jeffrey Epstein scandal.

Josiah-Faeduwor hopes to "institutionalize student involvement in MIT's decision-making processes."

The general role of the Committee on Guidelines for Outside Engagements "is to figure out values and guidelines that MIT can use for determining whether they do a specific outside engagement or not," Su said. "We want to make sure that the student voice is heard, not forgotten."

The Committee on Campus Climate and Policies around Discrimination and Misconduct "have been interested in doing more short-term projects that we can at least implement within the next few months with tangible outcomes by the end of this school year," Chen said.

The committees have met once thus far and are still solidifying their plans for the rest of the year. Both will generate a report by Spring 2020.

"We will definitely hold office hours throughout next semester, so at any opportunity, students are more than welcome to come in and individually talk to us about what they are thinking," Elango said. Non-chair committee members will also be present during office hours.

The other members of the Student Committee on Campus Climate and Policies did not respond to *The Tech*'s request for comment.

Editor's Note: Fiona Chen was an opinion editor for The Tech, *stepping down before assuming her position in the UA. Max Langenkamp is an arts staff writer for* The Tech.

Leonard: 'It's really important to be active in the community'

AAAS, from Page 1

ocean science, wrote in an email to *The Tech* that he researches digital signaling processing for sonar, radar and seismic systems, ocean acoustic telemetry, global acoustics for ocean thermometry and ocean warming and matched field array processing.

Baggeroer has been conducting extensive research on ocean acoustics in the Arctic Ocean since 1978 and has worked as the chief scientist for several ice camps, he told *The Tech* in a phone interview.

"I have many students. Whenever I go to meetings, I encounter people who have written theses for me or been in my classes," Baggeroer said. It "is personally rewarding to see them flourishing."

According to his email, Baggeroer is also an Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE) fellow and Acoustical Society of America (ASA) fellow. He was the director of the MIT-Woods Hole Joint Program (1983–1988) and has been the director of the MIT-Lincoln Laboratory since 1968. He has also served as a senior advisor to the U.S. Navy.

Suzanne Flynn is also a speech-language pathologist in the department of otolaryngology and communication enhancement at Boston Children's Hospital. According to the website of the LEX Language Project, which she directs, Flynn researches aspects of language acquisition and multilingualism, including syntax acquisition for second- and third-languages, the multilingual brain, and the effect of Alzheimer's disease on language.

She is the co-founding editor of *Syntax: A Journal of Theoretical, Experimental and Interdisciplinary Research*. Flynn is currently one of the Maseeh Hall heads of house.

Wesley Harris, who is also the C.S. Draper professor of aeronautics and astronautics, served as the associate provost for faculty equity from 2008–2013 and the department head of the MIT aeronautics and astronautics department from 2003–2008.

Harris has made seminal contributions in the fields of unsteady aerodynamics, aeroacoustics, rarefied gas dynamics, sustainment of capital assets, and chaos in sickle cell disease. He has also worked to advance cultural diversity in academia and government.

Harris has also worked as associate administrator for aeronautics at NASA headquarters from 1993–1995, dean of the School of Engineering at the University of Connecticut from 1985–1990, and program manager at NASA headquarters from 1970–1980. He is currently the New House head of house.

Eric Klopfer is head of the Comparative Media Studies and Writing Section. His research focuses on educational technologies to support math and science learning at the high school and middle school levels.

Klopfer is the director of the Scheller Teacher Education Program, a formal program that trains MIT students who wish to become math and science teachers. He designs educational games to provide engagement through authentic involvement in problem-solving and works with schools and teachers to help them conceptualize how to incorporate project-based learning into the core curriculum.

"Our goal with a lot of these designs is not to necessarily just entertain kids with games … but rather use the games as a way to engage students in solving hard problems that are contextualized within the game," Klopfer said in an interview with *The Tech*.

Klopfer said that while completing his PhD in biology, he worked as a volunteer in educational programs with schools and teachers. He worked as a teacher in Amherst, using his background in computer modeling and biological systems to integrate technology into classrooms.

"A lesser-known aspect of the AAAS is its involvement with science education," Klopfer said. "So for me, it's particularly meaningful."

Douglas Lauffenburger is the Ford professor of biological engineering, chemical engineering, and biology. His research is in molecular cell bioengineering.

Lauffenburger's main research focus is in cell dysregulation and "identifying and testing new therapeutic ideas," according to the Lauffenburger laboratory website.

Lauffenburger is a member of the David H. Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research and the MIT Center for Gynepathology Research, as well as an affiliate of the Ragon Institute of MIT, MGH, and Harvard. He is also an American Academy of Arts and Sciences fellow and has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.

In an email to *The Tech*, Lauffenburger wrote, "To me the central significance of this honor is its recognition of contributions to the advancement of science broadly, in my case predominantly the creation of biological engineering here at MIT."

John Leonard, who is a professor of mechanical and ocean engineering, leads the Marine Research Group at MIT and pioneers work on simultaneous localization and mapping in autonomous vehicles.

Leonard told *The Tech* in an interview that he completed his PhD in 1994 at Oxford University, where he worked in one of the first "vibrant mobile robotics research groups." "I was obsessed with the problem of how robots could navigate and build maps of the world," Leonard said.

Leonard said a core aspect of AAAS is "advocacy for science," adding that "an important part of that is trying to communicate to the public."

Leonard also described academics as "part of a community" and emphasized that "it's really important to be active in the community, to help people when they ask for help, and to advocate for younger faculty, colleagues, students, and postdocs."

Flynn and Harris did not respond to a request for comment by *The Tech*.

Upcoming Sports Events

Thursday 5th

Squash
vs. Tufts
5:00 p.m.

Men's Basketball
vs. Salem State
7:00 p.m

Friday 6th

Men's and Women's Swimming and Diving
Winter Invite
6:30 p.m.

Saturday 7th

Men's and Women's Swimming and Diving
Winter Invite
10:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.

Women's Basketball
vs. Emmanuel
2:00 p.m

Squash
vs. Brown
4:00 p.m

Sports, Page 8

LAB SPOTLIGHT

Starving cancer by controlling cell proliferation

Understanding metabolisms of mammalian animals to prevent cancer progression

By Seung Hyeon Shim

Chemotherapy is a common treatment for cancer. Unfortunately, while some cancer cells are sensitive to this method of treatment, other cancer cells are unresponsive. This begs the question: what causes this selectivity in cancer cells?

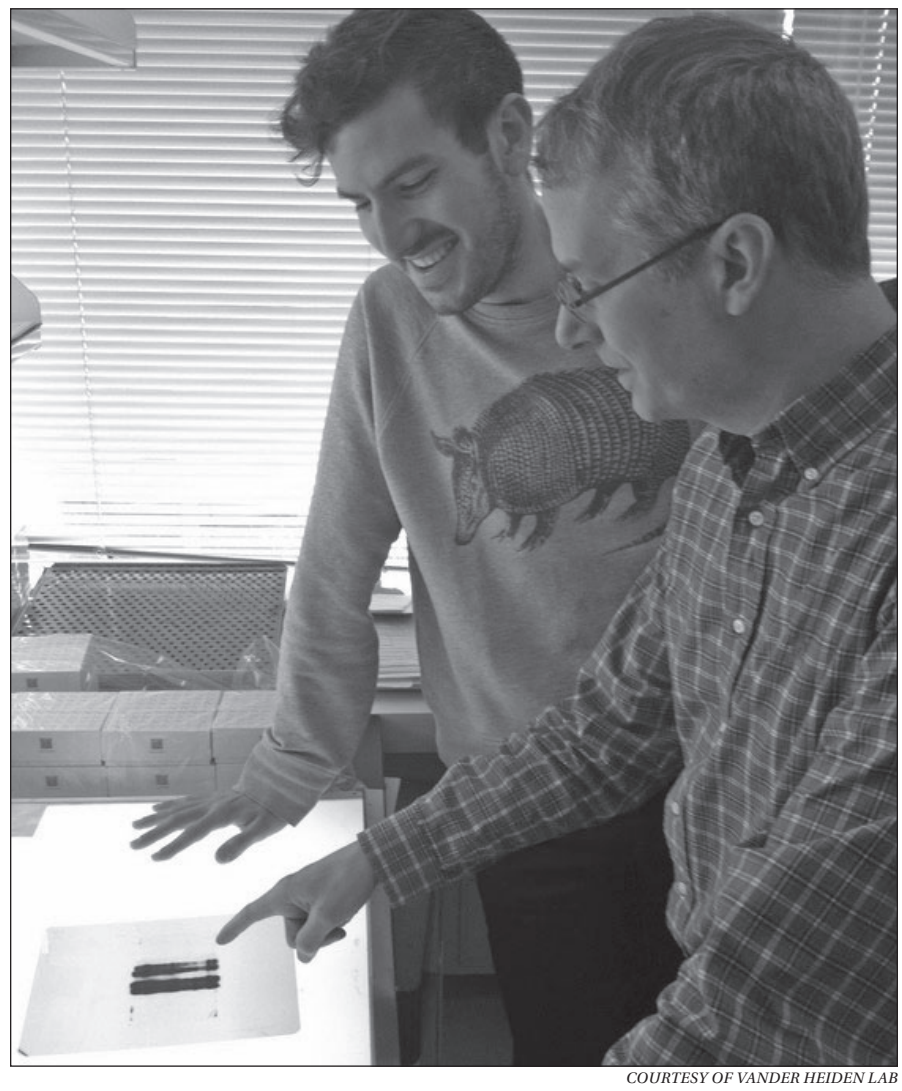
According to Matthew Vander Heiden, associate professor of biology, the key to addressing this challenge is understanding the metabolism of mammalian cells. His hypothesis marks a new era in cancer research, which previously focused solely on the genetic origins of cancer. "When I started my lab, the core hypothesis was that oncogenes, which cause cancer, would define metabolic differences among cancers. While this is true to a certain extent, our experiments indicated that cancer also takes on phenotypes based on the environment where the cancer is located," said Vander Heiden, who currently serves as an associate director of the Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research.

Vander Heiden believes that, while cancer cells are different from healthy cells, they are not completely deviant, as cancer cells repurpose resources already available in the body. Rather, the cancer cells make alterations to existing metabolic processes — they take the normal metabolic pathway of an organ and adapt in a way that allows them to mass-proliferate. Chemotherapy is designed to target cancer cells that have metastasized to specific sites. However, when proliferation causes cancer cells to diffuse throughout the body, chemotherapy is no longer a reliable treatment option. The goal of the Vander Heiden group is to identify specific nutrients that cancer cells use to grow, which will then allow them to target individual cancer cells with a specificity beyond the limits of current treatment options.

To understand cancer metabolism, the Vander Heiden Lab mainly employs mass spectrometry to investigate metabolic pathways, which Vander Heiden described as a way "to visualize and measure how those metabolic transitions are happening within the cells." Mass spectrometry is a technique that allows researchers to measure weight transformations in metabolites using their mass-to-charge ratio. Vander Heiden described an example: "if the cancer cell has several nutrients available to it, and you want to know which nutrient it eats, you can label a specific nutrient and see how it contributes to metabolic processes in cells." Through this labeling technique, which measures how specific isotopes' masses change over time, researchers can record which nutrients the cancer cells are dependent on, enabling them to target specific cancer cells for starvation.

Vander Heiden and his team see plausible solutions in inhibiting the cancer cells from proliferating by alternating the environment or the nutrients in which those malignant cells dwell. In addition to investigating how genes affect cancer development, as in traditional cancer research, "What we are really trying to understand is how genes plus the environment interact," Vander Heiden explained.

Coming up on its tenth anniversary at MIT, the Vander Heiden Lab's long-term goal is to adapt this technology towards understanding cancer cells in mammalian systems. As a researcher and a doctor, Vander Heiden also discussed the beauty of relating his discoveries directly to patients and drawing connections with the real world: "what I found most valuable is finding how metabolism and physiology work in the lab and seeing how this relates to things going on in the hospital." The Vander Heiden Lab's next step is to further investigate factors that constrain tumors from using metabolic pathways to grow, as well as to develop personalized medicine by understanding the different physiologies and metabolic processes that occur in each patient. Vander Heiden is looking forward to building a sophisticated picture of mammalian and cancer cell metabolic processes. As he put it, "The beauty of science is there's another question, always a next bit of complexity in the problem."



COURTESY OF VANDER HEIDEN LAB

Dr. Vander Heiden and one of his PhD students review data in the lab.

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By Opinion Writer
STAFF REPORTER

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Write for Tech Opinion

join@tech.mit.edu

OPINION OPINION OPINION

MOVIE REVIEW

Little Joe incites little horror

Beecham can't save *Little Joe*'s audience from boredom (or the world from Little Joe)

COURTESY OF MAGNOLIA PICTURES

Emily Beecham delivers a stunning performance in *Little Joe,* but it's not enough to keep the movie on track.

By Liane Xu
ASSOCIATE ARTS EDITOR

When I finished *Little Joe*, I thought about all that the film could have been. Its premise embodies a kind of originality that is rare in Hollywood these days. Emily Beecham delivers a spectacular performance, her subtle facial expressions vividly illustrating her character's inner thoughts. What a shame that the movie as a whole could not achieve that same level of subtlety.

In *Little Joe*, Alice (Beecham) and her co-worker Chris (Ben Whishaw) create a genetically modified flower called Little Joe. When a person inhales Little Joe's pollen, they are supposed to become happier. Breaking regulations, Alice gifts a Little Joe to her son, Joe (Kit Connor). However, there is a devastating but almost invisible side effect. Bella (Kerry Fox) desperately tries to warn Alice, who is convinced that her plant is safe. Nonetheless, as more evidence piles up, Alice slowly realizes that Bella may be right and tries to kill all the Little Joes — but the damage has already been done.

The film starts off strong. The first half hour is full of interesting developments, and the use of neon red lighting and haunting sound effects perfectly captures the mood. Then begins Alice's slow — frustratingly slow — realization that her Little Joe is not harmless. This is where Beecham truly shines. She masterfully displays Alice's inner turmoil through her glancing eyes and increased hesitancy when answering questions.

Apart from Beecham's acting, though, there are few redeeming qualities in the second half of the movie. The lighting and sound effects that are effective in the beginning of the film are reused until they feel excessive and downright ridiculous. (Economists call this the "law of diminishing returns.") Whishaw, fresh off an Emmy win for *A Very English Scandal*, is straitjacketed by his one-sided, flat character. Almost every plot development feels predictable. The action from the beginning devolves into an hour of Alice finding evidence that Little Joe is harmful and becoming increasingly worried, over and over again.

Ultimately, Little Joe prevails. Plans are made for its widespread use. The dramatic turn of events in the end could have incited a unique type of horror in viewers. Instead, it felt like a cop-out. Maybe it was for the best: we don't need more people who are scared of GMOs.

★★☆☆☆

Little Joe

Directed by Jessica Hausner

Screenplay by Jessica Hausner and Géraldine Bajard

Starring Emily Beecham, Ben Whishaw, Kerry Fox, Kit Connor

Not Rated, Playing Dec. 6

VIDEO GAME REVIEW

Whack, dash, die, upgrade, repeat

Sparklite is a cute addition to the roguelike genre

★★★★☆

Sparklite

Developed by Red Blue Games

Published by Merge Games

Available on Nintendo Switch, PS4, Windows, and Xbox One

By Nathan Liang
EDITOR

Inspired by the *Legend of Zelda* franchise, *Sparklite* is an adorable and fun addition to the roguelike genre. The developers had the idea of framing it as an "approachable roguelike," taking inspiration from *Rogue Legacy* in the game's mechanics and fitting the game onto an adventure story-based premise.

You start the game on an airship manned by our protagonist, Ada, and her small mechanical friend. A freak storm soon sends the duo crash-landing down to the world of Geodia, where we delve into the chaos caused by the evil Baron, your typical greedy, power-hungry villain. The Baron seeks the powerful hunk of sparklite residing at the core of the world, and his scramble to become the most powerful being in Geodia is causing the world to shake and shift in unexpected ways.

This is how the developers explain the procedural generation of the map every time Ada is "resurrected," a mechanic that is also cleverly explained by the medical bay in the floating refuge above Geodia. If the doctor notices Ada is in trouble, she'll send a metal claw down to scoop Ada up from safety and let her rest until she is well again.

Overall, the game fits the nostalgia-inducing retro aesthetic, with its cute pixel art and catchy, GameCube-inspired soundtrack. The game is easy to get into, and the tutorials don't make you feel like the developers are trying to hold your hand as you get started.

However, there are a few downsides. Once you really get into the grind, the game can start to feel repetitive. Before each new run, you can upgrade Ada's gadgets as well as the shops available on the floating refuge, but upgrades require collecting sparklite, and each subsequent upgrade will inevitably be more expensive than the last.

The bosses in each distinct area of the map were also not nearly as challenging as I thought they'd be. Your initial introduction to the world's bosses makes them out to be intimidating and difficult enemies to face, but that turned out to not really be the case at all. As usual, the bosses follow a predictable pattern, but for some, there are blindspots that can easily be exploited, making the fight trivial — and if your play style is anything like mine and you invest early on in making a super robust character, tanking the bosses also becomes a trivial matter.

In playing this game, I couldn't help but think of *Moonlighter*, another roguelike game released around this time last year. Both have a similar aesthetic and similar game mechanics, and both are addicting and fun, but if I had to pick between the two, I'd say *Moonlighter* would win out in the comparison.

COURTESY OF RED BLUE GAMES

The finding and collecting of musical Beats is an endearing side quest in *Sparklite*.

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MOVIE REVIEW

God's Rottweiler meets God's Labrador

Pryce and Hopkins are a match made in Heaven trying to save the Church from itself

By Alexandra Sourakov
STAFF WRITER

I knew the second I saw the solemn queue of red-robed cardinals processing to "Dancing Queen" that I was going to love this movie. Or maybe, I knew it from the moment I learned that Anthony Hopkins and Jonathan Pryce would be playing opposite each other as Pope (Emeritus) Benedict XVI né Ratzinger and Pope (to be) Francis né Bergoglio. This beautifully shot film by "City of God" director Fernando Meirelles combines a gentle playfulness, a beaming beneficence, and a philosophical exploration of a unique turning point in history.

The story takes us from the moment Cardinal Ratzinger is crowned Pope to the moment the mantle passes unorthodoxly (i.e. by his own hand) to his successor, who sets it aside altogether along with all the other pomp of the papacy. The centerpiece of the film is a series of sometimes heated, sometimes touching tête-a-têtes between the two seminarians. The spotlight is trained on Bergoglio, the "lowly but chosen" Argentinian bishop and our current Pope, whose life story we are privy to through a series of flashbacks — a choice made, no doubt, to weave a story of redemption and rebirth, casting Bergoglio as the ready-made balm for the Church's internal bleeding and loss of members.

In documenting one historic moment, Meirelles creates a second one: the bringing together of two of the best actors of our time, who also happen to bear uncanny resemblances to their templates. Pryce, an old hand at playing religious authorities (Cardinal Wolsey in "Wolf Hall" and the High Sparrow in "Game of Thrones"), is a gentle powerhouse in his depiction of Bergoglio. He layers tones of radiant empathy, ever-present remorse, affected naiveté, and modest simplicity like ratatouille made by a Michelin-starred chef — a gourmet dish dressing up as rustic peasant food. His wrinkled yet youthful face seems to constantly express wonder at how fortunate he is to be able to see all that the world has to offer, whether it be the cheap pizza outside the Vatican or a sprig of fragrant oregano.

Benedict is in many ways a much more subtle and complex character than the open-hearted Bergoglio. He is cerebral and scholarly. He's less prone to making eye contact and more likely to challenge your premises. His rabid defense of church doctrines earned him the nickname of "God's Rottweiler," and Hopkins gives a glimpse of those teeth. Hopkins's Benedict is tired, sarcastic, impatient, and self-disparaging. His responses to Bergoglio's deeply personal reflections are dry and unemotional. He doesn't have the empathetic nature of his Latin American counterpart, but he has his own endearing qualities. He plays the piano but is ignorant of the Beatles. He eats dinner alone, accompanied by a bottle of Fanta.

Hopkins is more of an evocation of Pope Benedict: he speaks more slowly and less readily than his real-life counterpart, and although he attempts a vague German pronunciation at moments, the only thing that comes through is his distinctive Welsh lilt. Pryce, on the other hand, blew me away with his Argentinian accent and his apparent proficiency in four of the five languages featured in the film. But then again, he's not new to playing Argentinians of fascist leanings (having played Perón in *Evita*).

Both characters wear the weight of the past on their souls and the weight of the Catholic world on their shoulders. In treating Bergoglio's early ties with the military junta, the film attempts neither to whitewash his collaboration with the fascist regime nor to effect a sudden disillusionment in the viewers. Rather, the conflicting motives are presented impartially if somewhat perfunctorily, and the error in judgment is ascribed to youthful pride and high-pressure circumstances. I would have liked to see the internal struggle and political factors fleshed out in more detail, with more texture and historical context. At every other moment, I had felt close to the open-book character of Bergoglio, but at the climax, I suddenly felt held at arm's length, as his motives and rationalizations became opaque.

The film is visually stunning, featuring a wide variety of cinematographic compositions. The setting stretches from the streets of Buenos Aires to the Sistine Chapel. The camera shoots from all angles — inches from the face, high above the landscape, focused on the tip of a pen one minute and the ceiling the next. The grand scale on which the events portrayed in the film are unfolding is underlined by the intermittent intercutting of documentary footage portraying the scandals resulting from the Church's financial malfeasance or sexual assault of children. At the same time, there is a feeling that we are privy to an insider's view of something we would otherwise have only known through media portrayals. The tense, grey-toned flashbacks to Argentina's repressive past stand in stark contrast to Bergoglio's present placid nature and the sunny, idyllic shots of Italy.

The film also managed to provide a convincing depiction of character aging, something rare in modern cinema. Juan Minujín as young Bergoglio transforms from an idealistic, fresh-faced youth to a man with tired bespectacled eyes, subtle wrinkles (shout-out to the makeup artists), and a wearier and warier carriage. It's easy to see how the thoughtful, remorseful young man would develop into the benevolent, globe-trotting Papa.

This movie escaped the pitfalls of others in its genre: it neither made Bergoglio's early love a bigger deal than it was nor depicted a sudden character transformation (and instead showed a slow, difficult one). It did not shy away from quiet, tranquil moments of simple conversation. The filmmakers avoided the obvious pitfall of comparing Benedict's brief (mandatory) involvement with the Hitler Youth to Bergoglio's support of Perón. Somewhat surprisingly, considering their widely publicized nature, the film does not dwell too much on the sex scandals that have tainted the Catholic Church during this century, especially considering Benedict's confession to Bergoglio.

By the time the film was closing out with shots of the real Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Pope Francis greeting each other as old friends, I realized I had grown attached to these two popes, "both alike in dignity," each with his own flaws and regrets, and I felt I hadn't gotten enough of either of their stories. This is a film for those who enjoy satisfying character development, meditative scenes, thoughtful dialogue, and historical and political intrigue. It's a pity it's only playing on Netflix and not in the theatres, as it is certainly deserving of the "big screen."

★★★★★

The Two Popes

Directed by Fernando Meirelles

Screenplay by Anthony McCarten

Starring Anthony Hopkins, Jonathan Pryce

Coming to Netflix on Dec. 20

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Sports, from Page 2

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